

Honor marks aviation writer's long career

KINGSTON

Aviator's long career reaches new heights

By Emily Sweeney
GLOBE STAFF

Robert J. Whittier learned how to fly planes in the 1940s, and landed a job writing for aviation magazines. His writing career took off and, more than 60 years later, continues to soar. Most recently, Whittier was inducted into the Experimental Aircraft Association's hall of fame.

At his Kingston home recently, Whittier held a model plane with an elaborate frame constructed from balsa wood and covered in Japanese tissue paper.

"Some people think that model planes are toys," he said. To him, they are not just a hobby, but "a wonderful education in craftsmanship."

Whittier, 82, started building

model planes while he was a boy growing up in Whitman, soon after an ear infection caused him to lose his hearing at age 7. He learned to lip-read and continued to speak, though he could no longer hear his own voice.

"My loss of hearing cut me off from the neighborhood children," Whittier said.

As a result, he spent a lot of time reading, including a stack of aviation magazines, which he devoured. He began assembling model airplanes from kits, and riding his bicycle to the small airports that once dotted the South Shore.

"I soon became what they called an 'airport kid,'" said Whittier.

AVIATOR, Page 9

► AVIATOR
Continued from Page 1

At Thayer Academy in Braintree, Whittier would frustrate his English teachers by submitting papers on airplane mechanics instead of the work they assigned on Shakespeare and other classics. After graduating high school in 1941, Whittier went to Parks College in St. Louis to study airplane engineering.

For the next few years, he worked as a plane mechanic at small airports in Maryland, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts.

One day, while working on an airplane, Whittier found that reaching behind the plane's instrument panel was needlessly difficult because of its design. Whittier promptly put his frustrations down on paper, penning a letter to the editor of an aviation magazine. Much to his surprise, Whittier's critique of the plane's design was published as an article, and the magazine mailed him a paycheck for \$50.

"That was the start of my writing career. I've been doing it for 61 years," he said. "It's habit-forming."

Not content simply to work on planes, he earned his private pilot's certificate and flew Piper Cub planes out of Norwood Airport.

In 1955, Whittier joined the Experimental Aircraft Association and started writing for Experimenter magazine (now called EAA Sport Aviation & Light-Sport Aircraft magazine). He also wrote articles about boating and aviation for the now-defunct Hunting & Fishing magazine.

Over the past seven decades, Whittier has produced more than 2,500 magazine articles and 10 books on aviation and boating. Last year he won the Bax Seat Trophy, a writing award given by Flying magazine.

Whittier is a valuable resource for local pilots who have questions about airplane mechanics, said



A younger Robert J. Whittier with one of the older planes at a 1960s Experimental Aircraft Association gathering in Illinois.

Jim F. Lane, president of the EAA's Chapter 279 at Cranland Airport in Hanson.

"He's the most knowledgeable person in aviation I know," said Lane. "He's just a book of knowledge. I think everyone [who flies planes] on the South Shore knows Bob. If you have a question, he's the guy to go to."

Whittier was inducted into the EAA Homebuilders' Hall of Fame last month. ("Homebuilt" refers to planes constructed from kits. The Federal Aviation Administration inspects and licenses such planes, designating them as "experimental" aircraft.)

Whittier traveled to EAA headquarters in Oshkosh, Wis., to attend the Nov. 5 hall of fame ceremony. Unfortunately, his wife, Helen, could not accompany him because she has Alzheimer's disease. The effects of the disease

forced the couple apart this spring, after many years living in Duxbury. His wife moved into a nursing home, and Whittier moved to a mobile home in Kingston.

Whittier stays busy writing for EAA's magazines, and restoring an antique plane at Plymouth Municipal Airport.

"My airplane is a real antique, a 1935 Taylor Cub, the grandfather of all Piper Cub airplanes," he said.

Whittier still types his articles on his trusty IBM electric typewriter ("my girlfriend") and faxes them from his home on Lodgepole Lane to the EAA offices in Wisconsin.

Mary Jones, editor of EAA's Sport Pilot & Light-Sport Aircraft magazine, has worked with Whittier for more than a decade.

"He's a great guy with a wonderful sense of humor," said Jones.

"He really understands the mechanics of flight."

Whittier is easily the magazine's most prolific writer, she said.

"That's a pretty solid career, I'd say," said Jones. "To do that every month... considering the fact he's deaf and can't pick up a phone and call someone; he has to [do extensive] research. The fact that he keeps doing it, in this day and age, attests to his love of aviation and his love to write. He really enjoys what he's doing."

Emily Sweeney can be reached at esweeney@globe.com.